

WASHINGTON -- Nebraska lawmakers in Washington were stunned to learn that Mike Heavican's name once landed on a Justice Department list of federal prosecutors who should be replaced

They could offer no insight as to why Heavican would have been on the chopping block

"That just shocked the heck out of me," said Rep. Lee Terry, a Republican. He added: "It more than shocked me -- it angered me."

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales has been plagued by questions about the firings of federal prosecutors

Some members of Congress have charged that the firings were politically motivated. Several top Justice Department officials have resigned over the controversy, and there is talk on Capitol Hill about holding a vote of no-confidence on Gonzales

More than six weeks ago, Terry was among the first Republicans in Washington to call for Gonzales to step down. Terry on Friday described Heavican as an excellent U.S. attorney, one of the best Nebraska has ever had

The Washington Post reported that about 30 U.S. attorneys were included on various firing lists compiled between February 2005 and January by Kyle Sampson, then chief of staff to Gonzales, and his colleagues

Heavican, appointed U.S. attorney for Nebraska by President Bush in September 2001, was on one of the lists

Heavican left his post last year when Gov. Dave Heineman appointed him as chief justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court

"Gee whiz, he was so poorly thought of the governor made him chief justice," Terry said. "It shows me how bizarre and incompetent the Justice Department has become under Gonzales."

This week, Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., joined those calling for Gonzales to resign. Hagel said Heavican's record, experience and reputation are beyond question

"He was a very effective U.S. attorney for Nebraska for almost six years," Hagel said. "Attorney General Gonzales should have served the nation as well as Mike Heavican."

The lone Democrat in the Nebraska congressional delegation, Sen. Ben Nelson, had no more information to share than his Republican colleagues

"If there were concerns (about Heavican), nobody in the administration informed me about them," Nelson said

He said confidence in the Justice Department continues to erode

"The administration needs to be forthcoming in providing information to Congress

and the American public," Nelson said

"It's difficult to believe that 30 professional attorneys all failed in the performance of their duties after being appointed to their jobs by the president and receiving confirmation from the Senate."

Reps. Adrian Smith and Jeff Fortenberry, both Nebraska Republicans, cited Heavican's qualifications

Smith speculated that Heavican's presence on the list was a mistake. "Clearly, the situation has been mishandled," he said

The shock wasn't confined to legislators. It extended to Heineman, who tapped Heavican to take over the state's judicial system

"He wasn't on my firing list," Heineman said. "It certainly wasn't on my background check."

